

Refashioning Dramaturgy: A Stage Rewriting of a 19th-c. Play in 2013 Greece

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Golfo by Spyridon Peresiades is by far the most famous modern Greek play ever written. Since 1894, the tragic-ending love story of a shepherd and a mountain girl has seen a great number of performances and adaptations, both on stage and screen. By the end of the twentieth century, the play was heavily criticized as old-fashioned and overemotional, and was rarely seen on stage. Whenever it found its way to the stage, its reception was not that flattering. However, in March 2013 the National Theatre of Greece staged a new version of *Golfo*, which attracted large audiences, critical acclaim, and an invitation to be performed at the ancient theatre of Epidauros. This new production, without altering substantially the language, characters, or plot, turned the old script into a visual and musical canvas, depicting distressed identities and wrecked dreams, and thus transforming, as we intend to argue, a piece of traditional dramaturgy into a work of alternative dramaturgy. Our aim in this paper is, therefore, twofold: first, to explore the ways the recent production rewrites the original text and negotiates its role in stage history, by disrupting its performative boundaries and refashioning its dramatic code; and, second, to discuss the haunting image of a society in mourning, the performance fosters—a “festive” requiem as the director put it—at a time when economic crisis and political instability incite feelings of despair and acts of violence, in response to what is often described, concerning the recent situation in Greece, as a process of modern colonization.¹

Introduction

Nikos Karathanos’ production of Golfo moved the audience, especially with a preposterous folk dance of a lost prosperity. In our eyes, it was the disruptive image of modern Greece. When, in the future, we would be asked how we felt nowadays, what was our country like, what did we long for, the only thing we would have to do, would be to show the National Theatre production of Golfo.

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1. A version of this paper was delivered in Tangier, Morocco, at the International Conference “Alternative Dramaturgies of the New Millennium,” May 30th–June 3, 2014, organised by the International Centre for Performance Studies, The Research Group of Performance Studies at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, and The International Research Centre “Interweaving Performance Cultures,” Freie Universität Berlin.

Golfo, the pastoral drama that almost everybody knows in Greece, whether a regular theatre goer or not, was first seen on stage more than one hundred and twenty years ago.² Written in fifteen-syllable verse, a metre typical of Greek folk poetry, the piece, by Spyridon Peresiades (1854-1918), narrates the story of a lovesick mountain girl, who devastated, when betrayed by a young shepherd, much like Ophelia or Juliet, commits suicide. *Golfo* has a long and rich stage history, most likely the richest of any Greek play ever written; it has been seen in countless performances all around the country, followed by a substantial number of screen and various other adaptations (Katsioti 195-206). However, during the last forty years, the play fell out of fashion; heavily criticized as utterly out-dated and overemotional, when seen on stage, it was primarily to be ridiculed.

Thus, when, in Spring 2013, the National Theatre of Greece chose to revive *Golfo*, it took theatre people by surprise. The play was put forward by the actor and director Nikos Karathanos, as part of the National Theatre wider project “What is our motherland?” in order to explore aspects of nationhood and identity under the recent, harsh and still unresolved, economic conditions.

The performance proved to be a hit. Large audiences were attracted, critical acclaim was unanimous. So huge was the success that, during the summer of 2013, *Golfo* received an invitation to be performed at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus along with the “immortal” ancient Greek dramas. Thus, an aged theatre piece, rejected for decades by the public and theatre practitioners, became, quite unexpectedly, the most successful production of the season.

Our aim in this paper is to explore the ways in which the recent production rewrites the original text and negotiates its role in stage history, by disrupting its performative boundaries and refashioning its dramatic code. We intend, also, to discuss the overwhelming endorsement of the performance, in response to identity issues and cultural challenges that the current financial situation in Greece brought forward. The National Theatre production of *Golfo* became a point of reference, a locus, that orderly reconnected past to present, individual to collective, and effectively framed memory—to remember Maurice Halbwachs’ input on social remembering—in contemporary time, space, and social context.

Refashioning dramaturgy

Nikos Karathanos and Youla Boudali, the dramaturg of the performance, worked primarily with the original text, following closely its language, rhythm, and verse, and keeping intact the line of the story. The text was also interspersed with passages written by Lena Kitsopoulou, the well-known writer, actress, and director who has been associated with many controversial and provocative

2. *Golfo* was first presented by amateurs in Akrata, Peresiades’ birthplace, in 1893. The first professional production was held in Athens by Dimitrios Kotopoulos theatre company, “Proodos” [Progress], on August 10, 1894 (Hadjipantazis, *From the Nile to the Danube*, table 407a).

scripts, as well as performances. Her contribution, however, did not trail her usual edgy and confrontational style of writing. On the contrary, she provided the main character with a lyrical ballad on love, mourning, and loss, which secured the tempo and intonation of the nineteenth-century drama, undermining all expectations related to her collaboration in the final text. But this was the very way the project was built. The production carried out a whole series of “surprises” for the audience.

For a start, the male and female leading parts, the two lovers, were assigned to three pairs of performers, each representing a different generation: passionate adolescents, desperate and defeated adults, and, in contrast to the original, an aged couple, having survived against all odds.³ The fragmentation of the main characters challenged the notion of an idealized and unfortunate, juvenile love, sliced the plot, and broke with the line of narration, controlling the levels of psychological identification and questioning the idea of a distinctive past, time, and place, as often embedded in romantic imagery. The staging was full of contemporary references that did not simply enrich performative codes or stressed interrelation to modern and traditional. Aspects of locality, contemporaneity, and triviality were constantly mixed, so that the interweaving of seemingly contrasting and ambivalent elements became a tool for the refashioning of dramaturgy.

The opening scene, for example, a sentimental, almost sugary moment, was played by the elderly couple, as a clear but withering reminder of the play’s long history and its association with tradition and old-fashioned dramaturgy. At the same time, though, both players, Yiannis Vogiatzis and Aliko Alexandraki, who actually have repeatedly worked in mainstream companies during their acting careers, were the only performers who were dressed in contemporary clothes, as if putting in display their profession, their function as enduring commentators, and their role as ordinary and long-lasting lovers. Their physical, material presence was, thus, in many ways significant, for they provided a frame and a diversion from the language and narrative of the play, which was, as said before, mainly constructed upon idealized images of youth and love.

Another quite revealing moment of the way the performance was constructed came when Lydia Fotopoulou, the second, adult Golfo, delivered Kitsopoulou’s illustrious monologue, a lament on the unbearable pains of love. The actress was transformed to a timeless figure, who spoke directly to the audience, not solely as a tormented heroine, but also as an oriental singer, with the whole company sitting in chairs around her like a folk band. This was one of the most touching and explicitly affective moments which, to the extent that details matter, managed to comment, in a sharp but incisive way, on the genre’s tear-jerker tech-

3. The original casting included: Aliko Alexandraki, Lydia Fotopoulou and Evi Saoulidou (Golfo), Yiannis Vogiatzis, Nikos Karathanos and Haris Grafoulis (Tasos), Aggelos Triantafyllou (Kitsos), Mihalios Sarantis (Giannos), Christina Maxouri (Astero), Giorgos Biniaris (Thanasoulas), Yiannis Kotsifas (Demos), Maria Diakopanagiotou (Stavroula), Aggelos Papadimitriou (Zisis).

niques: the actress, when starting her monologue, waters her eyes with a sponge, soaked in a large bucket.⁴ Such instances, as well as the use of music or the style of acting, did not necessarily cancel out pathos or sentiment, for they were clearly far from any estrangement effect. However, they artfully inscribed the pastoral drama's genealogy, legacy, and its rejection within the performance's discourse.

A similar practice was visible in the "building" of Stavroula, Golfo's love rival. The character was played by Maria Diakopanagiotou, a young actress, who just a year before the production, acquired fame through a TV commercial, impersonating a simple, naive, and extremely funny peasant girl. Stavroula's peasantry, though, was of a different kind. She was rich, demanding, and ruthless, in striking contrast to the image Diakopanagiotou impersonated on TV. Her attitude reflected power and primitivism. She and her friends, quite revealing appeared in certain scenes dressed up as bears, that is as natural hunters, looking for prey. Such surrealistic touches, as the director labelled some of his choices, undermined the representational mode of the genre and modernized its stage language, but also blended old, modern, and trivial, creating contrasting images of rurality—from idyllic to threatening, and unsettling, complex reflections of nowadays materiality.

The most stimulating aspects of the production and, at the same time, an effective tool in visually and audibly rewriting the play were music, set, and costumes. The latter were designed by Elli Papageorgakopoulou.⁵ The pastoral environment of rural Greece and the national dress of foustanela, that are integral parts of the genre, still dominated the stage, albeit substantially altered. First of all, the otherwise bare acting space was scattered with enormous black fabric puffs—transformed into rocky hills, a village fountain, a humble hut, or a flooded river—"creating a changing, three-dimensional set onto which the actors climb, sit, and roll, struggling to scramble, or even hide" (Mitroutsikou 2013). Hence, almost without costumes, props, or color, the stage echoed bucolic surroundings and traditional garments. The representation was, moreover, highly pictorial but visually unvarying, counterbalancing the exceedingly ornamented rhetoric of the dialogue. The elusiveness and flexibility of the shapes and materials used were contrary to the notion of a concrete, unchanging, and perpetually tangible world, destined to shelter the nation's imagined past.

The soft and oversized cushions facilitated the performers' movement which, at certain moments, seemed to comply with a dance routine. Distorted folk dances were alternated with slow-moving steps, while music, played by the very same actors and actresses on stage, held an important role in enhancing the action. As with every other aspect, tunes, even though in direct dialogue with folk music,⁶

4. Excerpts of the play, including the lament by Lydia Fotopoulou, may be seen online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfdvoC_SWCc, accessed September 23, 2015.

5. Photos from the production are available at the National Theatre web site: http://www.n-t.gr/el/events/golfw_/, accessed September 23, 2015.

6. Aggelos Triantafyllou takes the credit for the music of the performance, during which two recorded folk songs from the district of Epirus were also heard.

sounded nothing like the traditional melodies that accompanied the play throughout its stage history. Yet, along with modern instruments, a clarinet and a huge tambourine were used, both referring to folk celebrations and rural festivals.

The most substantial and expressive paradigm of the highly symbolic interventions was the inventive use of foustanela. From the very beginning, not only *Golfo*, but the whole genre of pastoral drama relates to the most recognizable traditional Greek costume. Foustanela, the garment resembling the Scottish kilts, has, since the Greek War of Independence, been connected to the idea of rebellion, patriotism, national bravery, even the Greek soul. By the time *Golfo* was first performed, foustanela was already a symbol,⁷ even though it was still used as an everyday piece of clothing on mountain communities. Nowadays, foustanela is associated to a great variety of national iconic rituals and images, ranging from most official (such as parades and the presidential guard in front of the Greek Parliament) to overtly commercial and trivial (for example, cheap souvenir dolls and traditional delights in tourist shops). Those who criticize such nationalistic iconic images, would still wear the national costume, only to mock it.

Dressing the whole cast with long black foustanelas—in striking contrast to the pure white that tradition demands—abided by the “rules” and inheritance of the pastoral dramas and somehow provided for its rehabilitation. More importantly, these costumes highlighted, more than anything, the idea of mourning that the director stressed in his interviews, assisted projections to national imagery, and linked the production to questions of subordination, dependence and defeat that the economic crisis revived.

Histories

The stage history of the play carries a heavy significance that cannot be overlooked. Interestingly enough, on its first appearance, in spite of its success and its vernacular language, it was thought of as a step backwards. Its form was melodramatic and, more importantly, depicted an image of rural Greek life that, even back in 1893, was for the Athenian audience distant if not distorted (Hadjipantazis, *Komeidyllio* 147-148, 264); but, at the same time, this image was by no means threatening or disturbing.

In the 1890s, almost sixty years since Athens had become the capital of the independent state, the much desired urbanization was already a fact. Even though “Paris of the East” was a gross overstatement, the Athenian middle class felt comfortable with its new European identity, secure enough to idealize the simpler ways of rural life. In the meantime, professional theatre was enjoying an unprecedented success, mainly through the introduction of musical comedies that combined Greek themes with European music, mostly copied from French light operas and vaudevilles. And as Athens was growing rapidly, a more sizeable middle class

7. Perhaps the most emblematic image of this era is Spyros Louis, the marathon winner of the first modern Olympic Games, held in 1896 Athens, enjoying his triumph wearing a foustanela (Hadjipantazis, *From Nile to Danube* B2, 252).

was in the making, able and willing to support theatre companies wealthy enough to produce expensive entertainments in which young and attractive actresses starred. Within this milieu, *Golfo* was a somewhat backwards, yet safe choice, so safe in fact, that while her popularity waned in Athens, she continued, for eighty years, to lure primarily provincial audiences, solidifying a Greek national identity based on the legitimation and idealization of a common past.

It was this comfortable nostalgia that appealed to the pioneer movie makers of Greece and urged them to produce the first silent film version of *Golfo* as early as 1915. Forty years later, one more version appeared. By that time, cinema had reached small towns and villages, offering a new medium to accommodate national imaginings. Small travelling companies also kept the play alive for a good part of the twentieth century. By the mid-1970s though, television had brought provincial touring to an end. *Golfo* had no grounds to be presented anymore; however, its significance was underlined by the new politicized movie makers, especially by Theo Angelopoulos, the only Greek director of his generation with an international presence and the winner of prestigious awards.

His famous 1975 film, *The Travelling Players* [*O θίασος*], a panorama of Greek history from 1939 to 1952, chronicles a series of bleak episodes and still bleeding wounds: dictatorship, World War Two, occupation and resistance, liberation, British Rule, civil war, persecution of communists, the triumph of the bourgeois state. A traumatic national history unveils in the background, while the foreground is occupied by the endless wanderings of a minor theatre company, trying to survive while playing *Golfo*. Following the success of the film in the post-junta era, the play becomes an emblem and an allegory linked to modern Greek history. At the same time, however, *Golfo* becomes synonymous with misery and wretchedness, artistic poverty and despair.⁸ That is until 2013, when *Golfo* landed in Epidaurus.

The modern history of the theatre of Epidaurus began in the 1930s under Ioannis Metaxas' dictatorial regime. Since then, only a handful of non ancient plays have seen their way there, all of them by famous artists and world-class theatre organizations. National pride has been expressed a good number of times at the "holy" grounds of the ancient auditorium, which is "preserved" only for "high" culture—a culture that, by definition, excludes all modern Greek repertoire (Patsalidis, *Theatre and Globalization* 186-187). By entering Epidaurus, *Golfo* was immediately rehabilitated and accepted by upper classes and intellectuals. As part of such a transition, *Golfo*, in Eric Hobsbawm's words, was "modified, ritualized and institutionalized for the new national purposes" (6). The performance of the nineteenth-century play responded to the challenges of recent years, adapted to contemporary social and cultural conditions, and became a "state-of-the-nation play," to borrow Dan Rebellato's term, for it commented "directly or indirectly on the ills befalling society, on key narratives of nation-

8. A bright spot in this viewpoint is Simos Kakalas' productions of *Golfo* in a series of versions and re-adaptations, since 2004 (Neophytou 96-97 and 106-08).

hood, or on the state of the nation as it wrestles with changing circumstances” (Holdsworth 39).

Nikos Karathanos’ *Golfo* was a festive “requiem,” according to his own words.⁹ The distressing singing of the dressed-in-black troupe evoked the mourning of a society for the sense of community it used to share, for the loss of its common references and characteristics, and for the darkness and melancholy of contemporary life. It showed a vivid image of “then and now,” as a critic put it (Marinou 2013), or “granted the play with an aura dismal and absurd at the same time, so suitable to nowadays Greek reality,” as it was pointed out in another journal (Stamos 2013). The discussion on the performance and the play unearthed past and present relations to national iconography, mythology, and ideological battles, and emphasized its link to ethnic narrative and current necessities.

Amidst the images of a history deeply rooted in a celebrated past and a much more ambivalent present, soothing relations (for instance, the old loving couple), cathartic emotions, and reassuring cohabitations (for instance, the commercial with the “sacred”) were put forward in a construction that seemed capable to ease previous tensions. In this period of uncertainty, 2013 *Golfo* was there to remind us of long-gone principles, customs, and practices which can still work as a safety net. To turn to Halbwachs again, here the frameworks of memory re-connected time and addressed pressing questions of today, primarily though to sustain notions of stability, universality, and generality (325). Somehow tradition prevailed. But if “history starts only when tradition ends” (Halbwachs, qtd. in Ricoeur 396), then the National Theatre production of *Golfo* placed history in a site of longing, forgetting, and forgiving. As Savas Patsalidis justly pointed out, commenting on the director’s depiction of the past, what this dramaturgical and stage work declined to show is the notion of construction that lurks behind such institutions and generalizations.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the director’s stage re-writing of the play became the flag of a national dramaturgical upsurge.¹¹ Political turbulence and economic insecurity, in the age of bailout-loans, corruption, austerity measures, and violent riots, resulted to the reign of an eroding and dividing language and imagery. Dichotomies such as “we” and “they,” and the need to defend an indeed vague notion of Greekness flood public discourse. The description of recent financial situation in Europe and Greece, in Paul Krugman’s vocabulary, as “a simple morality tale of debt and punishment,” the daily reports on Troika’s periodic evaluation, and the idea of fiscal subordination are used to recall colonial power relations.¹² The

9. “Golfo’s festive requiem”; interview by Christos Paridis, *Lifo*, 331 (13 March 2013): [http://www.lifo.gr/mag/features/3688, accessed September 23, 2015].

10. Objections for the idealized and nostalgic use of the past in the performance see also in Tsatsoulis (2013).

11. See, for instance, how the National Theatre production of *Golfo* is praised for its innovative force in Tsokou (2013) 171.

12. The term new or neo-colonialism has been used in the Press and blogs by primarily left-

performance of *Golfo*, then, was hailed as a triumphant moment of indigenous expression of cultural independence, a monument of national pride. All the same, it can also be seen as an indicator of an identity crisis, a return to the very same question of belonging (East or West in the nineteenth century, North or South now); in other words, of embracing innovation as well as of articulating cultural antagonism (Holdsworth 34).

Conclusion

The director of *Golfo* took for granted its fictional world. Never questioning its true existence and validity, he turned the performance into a lament of the nation's lost innocence. Furthermore, a message was carried: the rediscovery of that innocence and the re-establishment of communal life would improve our current living conditions. In other words, the production of 2013 was built upon the same ideological foundation laid up in 1893, when an out-dated romanticism was still present. Consequently, traditional imagery—folklore or naturalistic—somehow survived. The play's visual idiom was thoroughly modernized, while sentimental or melodramatic elements remained intact; in fact, they were, at times, emphasized. Yet, this risky approach was fully accepted and the success was unquestionable.

In a TV documentary few weeks after the last run was over, the director stated that, a little while after the opening night, the production had stopped being his own.¹³ Reactions and interpretations were coming from viewers' responses. Indeed, while salaries were sliced even further, unemployment was rising, and neo-Nazi political parties were growing stronger than ever, an almost desperate sense of national pride seemed to emerge out of audiences, critics, and festival agents.

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wing economists, political scientists and journalists to describe the loss of economic sovereignty in over-indebted countries such as Greece, the replacement of political control by financial control, and the ruling of the state's law making by institutions located outside the country. See, for example, Douzinas and Papakonstantinou, Smith, Glasman and Cruddas, Rasmus. Troika is an informal term referring to the three organizations that control Greece's financial future—or at least a future within the European Union: the European Commission (EC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Central Bank (ECB): <http://gogreece.about.com/od/Glossary-of-Greek-Terms/g/The-Troika.htm>, accessed September 23, 2015.

13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wH0Xd5EePNs>, accessed September 23, 2015.

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